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Breaking the Silence: Sexual Harassment of Mexican Women Farmworkers

Nicole Jung-Eun Kim^{a,b,*}, Victoria Breckwich Vásquez^{c,d}, Elizabeth Torres^e, R. M. Bud Nicola^a, and Catherine Karr^{c,f}

^aDepartment of Health Services, School of Public Health, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

^bSchool of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

^cDepartment of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences, School of Public Health, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

^dSchool of Nursing & Health Studies, University of Washington Bothell, Bothell, Washington, USA

^eNorthwest Communities Education Center/Radio KDNA, Granger, Washington, USA

^fDepartment of Pediatrics, School of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand Mexican women farmworkers' perceptions of workplace sexual harassment, its related factors and consequences, and potential points of intervention. This community-based participatory research study conducted focus groups with 20 women farmworkers in rural Washington. Four coders analyzed and gleaned interpretations from verbatim transcripts. Three main themes were identified. It was learned that women farmworkers: (1) frequently experienced both quid pro quo and hostile work environment forms of sexual harassment; (2) faced employment and health consequences due to the harassment; and (3) felt that both individual-and industry-level changes could prevent the harassment. Based on these findings, the authors identified three sets of risk factors contributing to workplace sexual harassment and recommend using a multilevel approach to prevent future harassment in the agriculture industry.

Keywords

Community-based participatory research; farmworker; occupational health; sexual harassment; women

CONTACT Victoria Breckwich Vásquez, vbreck@uw.edu School of Nursing & Health Studies, University of Washington Bothell, Bothell, WA 98011, USA.

*Current affiliation: Department of Medicine, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA

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Introduction

In the United States, workplace sexual harassment (WSH) has been a longstanding occupational health concern. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made WSH prosecutable under sexual discrimination.¹ The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) then legally defined WSH as “quid pro quo” (employment or benefits contingent on submission to sexual favors) and “hostile work environment” (sexually inappropriate behaviors creating an offensive work environment) in 1980.^{2,3} Despite legal efforts to address WSH, it has remained an entrenched problem. In 2011, over 11,000 sexual harassment complaints were made to the EEOC, resulting in \$52 million in settlements.⁴

Published literature suggests that 50% of women will experience WSH during their careers, and rates may be higher among minority women working in male-dominated environments.^{2,5–11} However, only 2%–13% of women ever report WSH to authorities.¹² Women who are sexually harassed also experience higher rates of health care utilization, chronic pain, depression, and work withdrawal than nonharassed women, up to 10 years after the incident.^{2,7–10,13–17} Thus, prevention of WSH is vital to promoting the health of women workers.

Sexual harassment of women farmworkers has recently received nationwide attention. Women farmworkers have been forced to have sex at gunpoint, threatened, and been fired after filing complaints against their managers and foremen.¹⁸ Women also refer to one field in California as the “field de calzon” or “field of panties” due to multiple counts of rape.¹⁹ Despite this growing concern, literature on WSH has been largely limited to middle-income, educated, white women working in nonagricultural settings.

In the United States, an estimated 24% of the 1–1.4 million farmworkers are women.^{20–22} Seventy-four percent of farmworkers are from Mexico; 25% of farmworker families live below poverty; and 52% are unauthorized to work in the United States.^{21,22} Women farmworkers are a vulnerable minority in the agriculture industry. Because they are low-income, non-English-speaking, and work in male-dominated environments, they face higher risks of WSH.

To date, only two studies have explored WSH among women farmworkers. The first study surveyed Mexican women in Central Valley, California, and found that 80% of participants had been sexually harassed at work.⁵ A later study of women farmworkers in Oregon also found that WSH was widespread among both Spanish- and indigenous language-speaking farmworkers.²³ However, factors contributing to WSH in this industry and key prevention opportunities remain understudied.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR), a collaborative research process driven by community concern, equal involvement, and social action, has been recognized by health scholars and funders as an effective way to study and address health inequities.²⁴ We used CBPR methods to design a research-to-action project focused on WSH among Mexican women farmworkers. Focus groups and the grounded theory were used to explore women farmworkers’ perspectives on WSH in Yakima Valley, Washington’s agricultural heartland, and to allow for inductive analysis.^{25–28} Our aims included understanding (1) women farmworkers’ awareness of WSH; (2) its related factors and consequences; and (3) opportunities

for prevention. This paper focuses only on the research phase of the project. A separate publication on the action phase of the project is currently in progress.

Methods

Community-based participatory research partnership

This study involved a longstanding community-campus CBPR partnership called El Proyecto Bienestar, between the University of Washington's Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center (UW-PNASH) and several community partners (Heritage University, Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic, and NCEC/Radio KDNA) in Yakima Valley. The topic of WSH was chosen based on ongoing community concerns and priorities. This study was the first phase of a larger WSH prevention project entitled *Health and Safety of Women Agricultural Workers in Yakima Valley*.

The research team consisted of four investigators, three at UW-PNASH and one in Yakima Valley. Two investigators were familiar with qualitative research methods; two were fluent in Spanish and English. The team also included two Mexican farm-workers as community health workers (CHWs) and two Mexican UW-PNASH undergraduate students from migrant farmworker families, all of whom were from Yakima Valley. All team members were female and received WSH training from the EEOC and the Washington State Human Rights Commission prior to the study.

A project advisory committee (PAC), consisting of various community stakeholders, ensured a balanced community voice in the study design. Stakeholders represented farmworkers, industry, legal, regulatory, and health agencies. The PAC met monthly to bimonthly in Yakima Valley. All study procedures and materials were approved by the PAC and the UW's institutional review board (IRB) prior to the study.

Participants

CHWs and one undergraduate student personally recruited potential participants from their social networks over 2 weeks in early December 2013 using purposeful sampling. Recruitment was conducted away from workplaces using a study script approved by the PAC and UW-PNASH's IRB. Eligibility was limited to female farmworkers, aged 18 and older, who were fluent in Spanish, and had worked in Yakima Valley's agriculture industry for at least 2 years before the study. Twenty women were invited and 100% agreed to participate.

Data collection

Two focus groups, each with 10 participants, were held in late December 2013. These were repeated in February 2014 to gather perspectives on the analysis and reactions to key prevention messages and opportunities. A sample size of 20 participants was chosen to allow for various perspectives and in-depth analysis.²⁹ Reminder phone calls were made and transportation was provided to maximize turnout. CHWs each facilitated one 2-hour focus group in Spanish using a semistructured guide (Table 1, see supplemental material), while other team members observed and took field notes. Discussions were audio-recorded. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assigned and identified by numbers to

promote anonymity. Each participant completed a written, Spanish demographic survey. All study documents were developed in English, translated into Spanish, and then back-translated into English to ensure language consistency. Each participant received a \$25 gift card for her time.

Analysis

Bilingual research team members transcribed, translated, and back-translated the focus group transcripts from audio recordings. Final analysis was conducted using English transcripts. Four team members individually coded the transcripts and then discussed the codes to achieve consensus. The final code list of 14 code families and 65 codes was used to recode the transcripts. Interrater reliability for codes increased from 78% to 100% following discussion. The four members then individually reviewed the coded transcripts before reconvening to extract themes. *Atlas.ti* qualitative software was used for coding and analysis (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany).

Results

All participants were currently working (65%) or had previously worked (35%) in agricultural fields and/or warehouses in Yakima Valley. Participants who were not employed at the time of the study had worked in Yakima Valley for at least 3 years (range: 3–17 years) prior to the study. Field work consisted of planting, picking, and pruning tree fruits (apples, pears, cherries, grapes), hops, and vegetables (asparagus, cucumbers, carrots, pumpkin). Warehouse work consisted of packing and sorting tree fruits and vegetables. The majority of participants worked in both fields and warehouses (60%), compared with field only (30%) and warehouse only (10%). Table 2 (see supplemental material) shows additional demographic survey results. Three main themes and nine subthemes were gleaned from the focus groups.

Awareness of WSH

Quid pro quo and hostile work environment—Participants did not use the legal terms “*quid pro quo*” and “hostile work environment” to describe WSH, but they shared stories consistent with these sexual harassment definitions. One woman stated, “I was working by piece rate and one of the foremen told me if I wanted for him to give me more hours, I needed to sleep with him.” Another women described “hostile work environment” when she shared, “they make sexual insinuations with their lips and eyes and when they look at you from top to bottom that look alone sometimes makes you feel very uncomfortable.” Participants perceived WSH as unwanted verbal comments, physical grabbing, staring, and feelings of discomfort that hindered their safety and productivity at work. Some women were offered better hours in exchange for sexual favors, whereas others faced threats of termination when they didn’t comply with requests.

Although the majority of harassers were men (84%) and foremen (58%), harassment by women (16%) and coworkers (42%) were also substantial. One participant reported, “I was standing, we were cleaning onion, when she [co-worker] went by me and grabbed my

“buttocks,” whereas another participant shared that a female supervisor had told her friend, “if she let her get close to her, she will move her up in the [warehouse] lane.”

Widespread and persistent—WSH was common and persistent in the fields and warehouses; 75% of participants shared a personal account or another woman’s story of being sexually harassed at work. One woman reported leaving her job multiple times to avoid harassment, only to face harassment again at her new job. She shared, “I did not like the harassment, I only stayed one week and I left because he harassed me constantly. I went to work at a [another] warehouse and it was the same story, they constantly harassed me.” Multiple women agreed that the harassment had been longstanding in the industry. One woman shared, “they say things that we women should not have to listen to. And that is wrong, and has been happening too long,” whereas another woman said, “wherever you go it’s the same, wherever you work it’s the same.”

Consequences of WSH

Feeling disrespected—Participants shared a mixture of emotional reactions to WSH. Many felt disrespected as a person and a woman, whereas others felt anger, shame, and self-blame. Unwanted attention, gestures, and conversations undermined their purpose of going to work. One participant reported, “they [foremen] said things like ‘do you want to be with me for awhile’ and they talk about sex only. They see you only as a sex object, they don’t see you as a worker.” Women felt that harassers did not listen when they told them to stop. One participant said, “if you say no, the person who is checking your apples will start to bruise your apples, so you can get fired.” They consistently felt objectified and stated they deserved more respect in the workplace. Multiple women agreed when one participant shared, “we all deserve respect. We deserve that our dignity is respected when we work. We work hard and do our best.”

Negative health effects—Participants reported that working in agriculture negatively impacted their health. They described feeling stressed due to their work and family responsibilities. One participant reported, “we arrive late [at home], all stressed to prepare the food, take care of the children, bathing them, getting everything ready for the next school day.” When asked to self-rate their health compared with other women their age, participants on average rated their health as “fair” to “good.” They expressed concerns about unaffordable health care, exposure to pesticides, and unsanitary work conditions.

WSH also led to additional physical, psychological, and relational stress. One participant shared her experience of depression and disengagement when she said, “I feel, that it has affected me psychologically and physically ... when you least expect you fall into depression and you have no desire to see anyone.” Another woman described her hostility and anxiety towards future relationships. She stated, “I have become more aggressive, more hostile, because I feel like they always want something ... you’re always think they are looking at you with a dirty mind. You expect that they are going to say bad things to you, you don’t trust, and it’s hard to trust men again.” A third woman emphasized that the impact of WSH extended beyond the victim to the victim’s family, sometimes contributing to marital strain and divorce in the community. She said, “this [WSH] affects us not only as a

person but as a family. You are so tired of this, that you can't give your child all he needs ... you are so hurt ... it affects our children." She felt less available for her children because she was coping with postharassment trauma.

Barriers to reporting—Regardless of working in the fields or warehouses, women felt they had to tolerate harassment due to their socioeconomic and legal circumstances. They needed jobs to support their families and were well aware of the power differential in the workplace. One woman reported, "I believe it's the abuse of power ... that's why they do it. Why don't they do it in the streets? Because they know they can go to jail. They do it here because they feel that they have the power to control, manipulate, and be able to take advantage. That's why it happens in the warehouses and fields and most of the time, it is the foremen." Several women were explicitly told not to file complaints given their social circumstances. According to one woman, "I worked in a place where the foreman told us before we started to work, 'If you complain or sue the farm, you will not win because this farm has very good lawyers and lots of money and you guys are poor.'" Women did not file complaints due to fears of retaliation, especially job loss, a risk they could not afford. Another woman shared, "if you don't have legal documents they threaten you for so many different things." Multiple participants felt that the foremen were taking advantage of their difficult life situations and abusing their power to hire and fire.

Empowered to change—Toward the end of the focus groups, several women advocated for change and action against WSH. As women shared stories, some encouraged others to file complaints to break the silence of WSH. One woman stated, "break the silence, to not be afraid regardless of whether you have or don't have legal documents, that harassment needs to stop everywhere and the silence is broken, now it is time to stop all of this abuse." They empowered one another by educating each other about the importance of workers' rights and offering advice on ways to confront the harasser. One participant shared, "one way to stop their joking is telling them, 'I don't like to joke around, and I don't want to joke with you. You have your place, I have my place, please respect me.' This can be a way to prevent it." Another woman told other women to bypass the foreman and file complaints directly with the owner, whereas a third woman suggested a campaign to educate women about speaking up against WSH.

Prevention of WSH

Self-defense strategies—Some participants developed self-defense strategies to deter unwanted attention from harassers. These strategies included wearing looser clothing to cover their bodies and pretending to be married or nonheterosexual at work when they were single and heterosexual, respectively. One woman reported, "I wear very big clothes, it doesn't matter if you don't like to have very big clothes, you put on pants that are bigger than normal, big shirts that cover your backside and sweat jackets, covering yourself they see you as an ugly woman, fat, and they don't bother you." Another woman described how she created a false identity to protect herself from WSH when she said, "I found a strategy to be able to get those men off my back ... when they start talking to me, I talk to them in a low voice like a man, I answer the same way they do and they are always surprised and they say,

‘that one is a transvestite.’ It doesn’t matter that they call me a transvestite.” Although this did not stop the harassment, it redirected the harassment to someone else.

Physical and social isolation—Physical isolation made women farmworkers more vulnerable to WSH. When foremen separated women from their husbands or coworkers in the fields, they were more likely to be harassed. One woman shared, “when I was left alone, there was this man and I was very scared of him. Every time I saw him, I used to run, I even left the ladder because on two occasions, he grabbed me and I couldn’t move, he covered my mouth and he told me to be quiet otherwise he was going to fire me.”

The lack of cohesion between women coworkers also perpetuated WSH. One woman described feeling socially isolated at work after being victimized. She stated, “they [female co-workers] think that you are promiscuous—they harass you, they signal you, when you are not doing anything bad, they even say that you provoked them [the men], that you’re harassing them when it’s them.” Her coworkers accused her of being provocative rather than offering comfort, suggesting the need to address both physical and social isolation in the workplace.

Work environment improvements

Participants identified several areas for improvement in the work environment to reduce WSH in the industry. Women perceived the implementation of dress codes, sexual harassment trainings, and reporting policies to be instrumental in preventing WSH at the system level. Three participants described how such policies were already in place at their warehouses. According to one participant, “at the warehouse where I work, we are not allowed [provocative clothing]. We must wear normal blouses like this that I am wearing now (gestures towards neck line). If the foreman sees you [wearing provocative clothing], he tells you, ‘Ay, you will need to change into something else.’” Another participant said, “since the lawsuit, the company brings all the people together and explains everything we should know ... regarding respect, amongst us, the foremen, and also the workers. [They instruct us that] if anything happens, we need to report it immediately.” Participants perceived that their workplaces were less tolerant of WSH because of these policies. Women working in the fields did not explicitly describe existing policies or trainings.

Participants also felt that better education about workers’ rights and proper reporting procedures could discourage WSH. Education should be broad and focused on workers, foremen, and owners. One participant stated, “in some places, they are already offering the training to the foreman and managers, but they should offer this training for all the employees, not only the persons who are in charge.” The same person emphasized the importance of proper enforcement of policies. She said, “they take the training but they are not paying attention to it, they need to be stronger in enforcing the rules.” Another woman requested flyers with information on workers’ rights. Two women suggested a written test for foremen on interpersonal relationships, whereas another woman wanted more severe penalties for perpetrators. There was a strong sentiment that preventing WSH required not only implementation, but also enforcement of new policies.

Discussion

Focus group findings demonstrated that although women farmworkers were aware of what behaviors constituted sexual harassment, their social circumstances and lack of legal knowledge prevented them from filing complaints. Similar to a previous study,⁵ 75% of our participants reported WSH. The negative impacts of WSH on personal and family health were also consistent with prior literature.^{5,15,22,30} Women farmworkers in our study already perceived their health to be below the average US Hispanic rating of “good,” were concerned WSH affected their families, and attributed feelings of disrespect, depression, and fear towards harassment.^{6,9,31,32} They also reported the lack of health insurance, language skills, and knowledge of the health care system as additional barriers to good health.^{33–35} In general, women farmworkers recognized that WSH was widespread and detrimental to their physical, psychological, and relational health.

We found that WSH in the fields and warehouses was more likely to occur due to three sets of risk factors. These included power differentials (gender, race/ethnicity/socioeconomic status/legal status), uninviting work environments, and disconnected interpersonal relationships.

The first type of power differential involved gender. In a largely Latino agriculture industry where the need for economic security drive women to work alongside men, gender norms create a challenge.^{5,36–38} This is especially the case because agricultural work in Mexico is gender segregated.⁵ In our study, 84% of perpetrators were men. Women farmworkers thought that men were more likely to harass women with a stereotypical feminine physique. As a result, they wore larger clothing and adopted false sexual orientations to avoid attention. Although the effectiveness of self-defense strategies must be evaluated in future studies, Hoffman’s theory of selective sexual harassment supports this process of degenderization. Hoffman found that male workers in another industry also targeted and avoided female workers who they believed were heterosexual and homosexual, respectively, irrespective of the female worker’s true sexual orientation.³⁹ The sex role spillover theory also found that WSH was more likely to occur when gender roles outside of work were inappropriately brought into the workplace.¹¹ Thus, being a woman in a culturally male-predominant work environment such as agriculture inherently increased the risk of WSH.

The second type of power differential involved race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and legal status. Waugh previously described how being a non-English speaker and living in poverty made women farmworkers more vulnerable to WSH.⁵ In our study, 58% of perpetrators were foremen and women expressed fears of retaliation. They relied on their bilingual foremen to communicate with English-speaking management and owners and felt that they were more likely to be threatened or denied benefits because of their language barriers and lack of legal documentation. Women felt that foremen abused their positions of power knowing their difficult social, financial, and legal circumstances. They tolerated the harassment to feed their families. Multiple studies have already found that the majority of WSH perpetrators are men in positions of authority, who often assume they are entitled to sexual favors.^{22,38} Women and male coworkers also contributed to WSH, but the presence of multiple inequities made foremen more likely to harass.

The second set of risk factors involved work environment characteristics. Poor supervisor-employee relationships, fewer work resources, and less administrative support are associated with greater risks of work injury, poor work performance, and WSH in both agricultural and nonagricultural settings.^{40–42} Waugh had also suggested assessing workers' awareness of WSH policies and trainings.⁵ In our study, women reported that the lack of antiharassment policies, clear reporting procedures, and supportive foremen increased the risk of WSH. In general, they recommended improvements in WSH-specific trainings and workers' rights education. Women were more likely to report harassment when they perceived that their workplace was intolerant of sexual harassment.⁴³ Specifically, three women reported successful antiharassment policies at their warehouses. Although the relationship between workplace policies and type of work needs further evaluation, this finding suggests that warehouses may be more receptive to policy change than the fields.

The third and final set of risk factors involved the quality of interpersonal relationships. Women farmworkers described a lack of female coworker support in the workplace. Sexually harassed women felt isolated or were criticized for provoking the harassment, suggesting displacement of blame and additional barriers to notifying authorities. Snyder et al. previously applied the social disorganization theory to WSH and discussed the importance of social cohesion as a mediator in settings of poor organizational support.⁴² In the agriculture industry, where infrastructure and support for WSH are minimal, strengthening social cohesion is critical.

Implications

WSH endangers the safety and health of Mexican women farmworkers. There is both a need and an opportunity to intervene as service providers at multiple levels. Public health professionals should consider community-based discussions with men and women to encourage dialogue about changing gender dynamics. Community agencies should develop a database of social and legal resources available to women farmworkers, and offer English classes and workers' rights education to reduce the power gap between farmworkers and foremen. Employers and occupational health agencies should establish and enforce antiharassment policies and trainings in the workplace to create supportive environments. This includes sending farmworkers out in groups to minimize isolation, educating employees about reporting procedures and the legal ramifications of WSH, and developing language-specific materials. Lastly, there should be efforts to increase community awareness of WSH to reduce social stigma and reframe WSH as a preventable occupational health concern. These steps will create a safer environment for women farmworkers and their allies, so they can speak up and break the silence of WSH.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, findings may not be generalizable to all women farmworkers. Our participants were likely seasonal or permanent workers based on their length of residence and were Spanish-speaking Mexican women. Future studies using focus groups should strive to include non-Spanish-speaking and non-English-speaking, migrant, and guest workers in various agricultural settings, including Washington. Second, the literature states that focus group sizes of 5–10 participants are ideal to ensure a variety of

contrasting opinions, and thus data saturation, during discussions.⁴⁴ Our findings are based on a limited number of larger sized focus groups totaling 20 participants. However, all participants were actively engaged during the discussion, enabling us to gather a range of perspectives. Third, our study focused on the stories of women farmworkers so we did not gather information on the demographics of the foremen or coworkers who were described as the harassers. Future studies would benefit from collecting these data to further elaborate on the second power differential discussed above. Fourth, we focused on including women who had worked in Yakima Valley, but did not specify the timing of their recent employment. Additional studies should consider defining a time frame to better correlate findings to current workplace dynamics. Lastly, our analysis and interpretation of data may not be inclusive of all cultural nuances. Nevertheless, we believe the value of qualitative research is derived from the stories shared by the participants, so the benefits of conducting the study in Spanish outweigh the potential for minor omissions.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore WSH among women farmworkers in Washington, where field crops and tree fruits predominate. It is also the first study to discuss the interactions between gender, economics, work environment, and interpersonal factors as they pertain to the risks of WSH in agriculture. Like prior studies, our participants described WSH as widespread, persistent, and undeserved. The study's qualitative and grounded theory methodology enabled women farmworkers to elaborate on their experiences. Based on their discussions, we recommend that rural health, public health, occupational, and legal advocates partner together to use a multilevel approach towards WSH prevention.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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